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Punk's rebel with a cause dies at 50

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"Every cheap hood strikes a bargain with the world
And ends up making payments on a sofa or a girl
Love 'n' hate tattooed across the knuckles of his hands
The hands that slap his kids around 'cause they don't understand
How death or glory becomes just another story"
- From Death Or Glory by Joe Strummer and The Clash

Joe Strummer, the political conscience of punk, and one half of its greatest songwriting partnership, is no more. He is said to have died peacefully in a chair in his kitchen after suffering what appears to have been heart attack while walking his dogs near his remote farmhouse in Broomfield, Somerset, on Sunday afternoon. His wife Lucinda and stepdaughter Elize were with him.

His passing at the age of 50 leaves Shane MacGowan as the last man standing of the songwriting tyros who turned the music industry upside down in the late 1970s.

Tributes poured in yesterday for the rebel with a cause who wrote such rousing and intelligent songs as Death Or Glory, Should I Stay Or Should I Go?, White Riot and Spanish Bombs. London Calling, The Clash's third and greatest album, was the US magazine Rolling Stone's album of the 1980s and was regularly voted one of the best of all time.

But a poor early record deal, and The Clash's commitment to leftwing causes, meant that neither Strummer nor the rest of the band fully reaped the rewards of their success.

Bono, who was about to work with Strummer on a tribute to Nelson Mandela in South Africa, and who never made a secret of how he modelled his own band on The Clash, said: "It's such a shock. The Clash was the greatest rock band. They wrote the rule book for U2."

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Unlike the Sex Pistols, with whom they were often compared, Strummer and The Clash were not the result of clever media manipulation but the authentic voice of protest and rebellion. His leftwing credentials, forged in the Elgin Avenue squatters' occupation in west London in the mid-70s, were heartfelt and real and never left him. The music he created with songwriting partner Mick Jones - the "Sound of the Westway", as he dubbed it - was equally revolutionary, mixing dub, rockabilly and ska into a multicultural roar of anger against poverty and racial discrimination.

Notting Hill was then the home to ethnic tension, incendiary street-protest politics and reggae legend Bob Marley, a powerful social and political brew from which Strummer and The Clash drank deeply. The Clash followed up London Calling with Sandinista!, which attacked American attempts to undermine the Nicaraguan revolution and berated Mrs Thatcher the year after she walked into Downing Street.

Not that Strummer, born John Mellor in Ankara, Turkey, the son of a senior diplomat, was your textbook working-class punk hero. While Brixton boy Jones fitted the bill more, Strummer was in many ways an early prototype of a radical Notting Hill trustafarian. He first changed his name to Woody Mellor, in honour of Woody Guthrie, the American folk legend, before evolving into Joe Strummer after forming a pub band called the 101ers - named after their squat at 101 Walterton Road, Maida Vale - who ending up playing support to the Sex Pistols.

Protest singer Billy Bragg said last night that Strummer fired his youthful political imagination after seeing The Clash at the first Rock Against Racism concert in Victoria Park in London's East End.

"I have a great admiration for the man. Joe was the political engine of the band, and without Joe there's no political Clash and without The Clash the whole political edge of punk would have been severely dulled.

"His most recent records are as political and edgy as anything he did with The Clash. His take on multicultural Britain in the 21st century is far ahead of anybody else," he added.

Unlike the Sex Pistols, The Clash never reformed after splitting up in 1986, three years after the band imploded when Strummer sacked Jones - a decision he later bitterly regretted. Until then they were the Lennon and McCartney of punk, sharing top billing and duties as lead singer. "I stabbed him in the back," Strummer later admitted.

Bob Geldof, another squatter-turned-rock star, said yesterday that he admired their refusal to sell out. "I know for a fact they were offered huge amounts of money [to reform]," he told the BBC. "They just said 'No, that isn't really what we stood for'. That's truly admirable. They were very important musically but as a person, he was a very nice man."

Despite Strummer's resistance to reforming, The Clash were believed to be considering a one-off reunion next year at their induction ceremony into the the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio. They will be only the second punk band, after the Ramones, credited with founding the movement in New York, to be honoured there.

Strummer always resisted revisiting past glories and insisted that he would rather get on with his work with his new band The Mescaleros, where he continued to experiment with world music. "I never look back. There's no point," he said.

He also carved a colourful niche for himself outside his own bands, fronting The Pogues for a time after MacGowan left, as well as making several memorable acting cameos in Martin Scorsese's film The King Of Comedy, Alex Cox's Walker and Straight To Hell, and Jim Jarmusch's 1989 Mystery Train, where he played an Elvis-quiffed armed robber.

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